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RUEHBU/AMEMBASSY BUENOS AIRES 5437
RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS 2664
RUEHPE/AMEMBASSY LIMA 2839
RUEHMN/AMEMBASSY MONTEVIDEO 4743
RUEHQT/AMEMBASSY QUITO 5298
RUEHSG/AMEMBASSY SANTIAGO 9905
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C O N F I D E N T I A L LA PAZ 002031

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [ECON](#) [BL](#)

SUBJECT: GOB CREATES NEW "INCIDENT" TO DISCREDIT USG

REF: LA PAZ 1862

Classified By: Ecopol Counselor Andrew Erickson
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

¶1. (C) On July 24, the Vice Minister of Culture Pablo Groux and Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Hugo Fernandez held a news conference alleging an Emboff had attempted to illegally export Bolivian cultural patrimony. The facts do not reflect the accusations. Graham Alexander, Deputy for the Office of Regional Affairs (ORA), followed the legal requirements for the shipment of 37 vintage firearms. Nonetheless, Groux claimed in a tendentious press conference that Alexander had not done any of the necessary paperwork to get permission to export the items. Fernandez then incorrectly claimed that it was only by "accident" that customs discovered the shipment, when the "discovery" was the consequence of Alexander's requesting permission to export them. In fact, Alexander, via his freight forwarder, followed the law and notified the Bolivian authorities of his intent to ship the items when he requested his export authorization. As with the Dinh affair (reftel) and recent statements by President Morales and his cabinet calling into question U.S. police in Bolivia, this incident represents and another obvious attempt by the GOB to publicly disparage the Embassy and to discredit the USG in general. End Summary.

The Facts

¶2. (C) Graham Alexander, Deputy for the ORA, who is departing post August 2, followed legal requirements for the shipment of 37 vintage firearms. Of the 37 items, 10 belonged to Alexander who acquired them from reputable antique dealers in Bolivia. The remaining 27 were acquired by his predecessor, who purchased them from legal merchants and private individuals. All but four of the weapons were of U.S. manufacture; there was also a British and three Czech vintage arms. The items dated from 1873 to approximately 1910. Recognizing that he could not ship the items with his normal household effects, Alexander privately contracted Carlos

Meave, a reputable freight forwarder (an Embassy vendor), to handle the shipment.

¶3. (C) According to Bolivian law, to export antiquities a shipment requires authorization from the national police, customs and the Vice Ministry of Culture (VMOC). While the authorizations were being obtained, the shipment was stored in a bonded warehouse at the El Alto international airport, which Meave arranged. The items remained secured in the bonded warehouse while each GOB agency considered the request. Meave always had a complete manifest of the items for the authorities' inspection. The police reviewed the request and granted their authorization.

The Chronology

¶4. (SBU) Below is a day-by-day chronology of events. Each event has supporting documentation.

July 9
Meave reviewed the shipment and noted the vintage rifles. The items were boxed up.

July 12
The shipment was taken to customs, weighed, assigned an airway bill and was stored in the bonded warehouse (where it remained until July 19). The shipper filled out an export authorization request with the ministry of foreign affairs (MFA). The MFA advised Meave to take his request to VMOC.

July 13
Meave visited the ministry of government's legal department. The legal department commented that it did not have these rifles on its registry, but instructed Meave to check with the police's registry department. Meave went to the police registry and the police stamped the airway bill indicating that it had no derogatory information regarding the items.

July 16
Meave spoke with customs officials who instructed him to send a letter to their legal (norms) office outlining the specific contents of the shipment and requesting permission to export.

July 17
Meave delivered the letter to customs. A customs official stamped the letter indicating that customs had received it.

July 18
Meave met the VMOC's Lupe Meneses, the national director for cataloging antiquities, to discuss the contents of the shipment. Meneses indicated that she would send inspectors to review the shipment.

July 19
VMOC inspectors went the warehouse, reviewed the shipment and photographed each item. Later that day Alexander and Meave met with the VMOC's Lupe Meneses who told them that the rifles are considered Bolivia's cultural patrimony and therefore must stay in the country. Alexander explained that he understood and supported the VMOC's position and would not export the items. Alexander then explained USG efforts in combating trafficking in patrimonial items and the two discussed sending the items to a mutually agreed upon museum.

The crates were returned to Alexander's house, where they are currently located. Meneses explained that Alexander still had ownership of the items and that he could resell them in Bolivia.

June 24
The Embassy received a diplomatic from the GOB stating that it had received Alexander's request to export the rifles but that the request was denied for reasons of cultural patrimony. The note also stated that the VMOC and other authorities would investigate the provenance of the collection.

The GOB Spin to Discredit the USG

15. (SBU) On July 24, at the same hour that the Embassy received the MFA's diplomatic note, the Vice Minister of Culture Pablo Groux and Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Hugo Fernandez held a news conference denouncing Alexander for attempting to illegally export Bolivia's cultural patrimony. The government television news channel, during its midday program, broadcast excerpts from the news conference and showed pictures of the items -- the pictures that the VMOC took on July 19. An electronic version of the news conference is available at:

<http://lapaz.state.gov/ECOPOL/ECOPOL.html>

16. (SBU) During the news conference Groux, using Alexander's full name and diplomatic rank, announced that Alexander had not done the necessary paperwork to get permission to export the items. Groux stated, "It is worth noting . . . the initial intention of bypassing the customs bureau office at El Alto airport without previously attempting to follow procedures to obtain authorization from the Bolivian state. Second, I want to underscore the responsibility of our customs officials who prevented this shipment from happening." (Note: As explained in paragraph 3, Bolivian customs was advised in writing of the contents of the shipment on July 17. End Note).

17. (C) More egregiously, vice foreign minister Hugo Fernandez used the same press conference to bash the behavior and motive of U.S. diplomatic officials in Bolivia, arguing that this was a concrete manifestation of U.S. arrogance vis-a-vis Bolivian law. Fernandez stated, "This is a case that was discovered accidentally . . . We do not want to make generalizations, but this case shows -- only a few days after another case involving someone (the Dinh affair) from the same diplomatic mission -- that the laws of our country are not valid enough for them." The facts are far afield of Fernandez's claims. Alexander, via his freight forwarder, notified the three Bolivian agencies responsible for granting export authorization. Pretending that the items were discovered by accident and that Alexander was trying to avoid Bolivian law is patently false.

Comment

18. (SBU) As with the Dinh affair, this incident represents another attempt by the GOB to publicly discredit an Emboff and more importantly to disparage the Embassy and the USG in general. Disturbingly, today's allegations seem a deliberate attempt to create an incident where there was none before. They follow a weekend of false allegations by President Morales and the Minister of the Presidency Juan Ramon Quintana regarding U.S. assistance. (Septel) Morales publicly claimed that the United States no longer ships wheat to Bolivia because of our biofuels initiative. (We still do ship wheat under PL-480.) Minister Quintana separately and publicly argued that U.S. assistance lacks transparency, despite the Embassy's constant dialogue with the GOB on our work. In the final analysis, it seems that the GOB is actively seeking confrontation -- even when only the smallest of pretexts are available. End Comment.

GOLDBERG